

Newsletter

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European Referendum: Which way for the green left?

The disaster of the 2015 General Election has seen a rabidly anti-working class, anti-environmentalist and pro-Finance Capital Tory government “elected” (a word not everyone would use to describe a victory won with around 25% support from the electorate and only just over a third of the actual votes cast).

Nonetheless, under our corrupt and gerrymandered ‘First-Past-The-Post’ electoral system we now have a government led by Tory toffs and containing an unprecedented number of Europhobes determined to use the promised (and now presumably forthcoming) European Union Referendum to lever the UK out of the EU. If EU withdrawal means loosening the (already considerably weakened) bonds holding the UK together and risking a rise in secessionist sentiment then some of them are even prepared to abandon Scotland as well, consoled by the belief that this would leave the Tories as the permanent party of government in England.

With the rise of UKIP (now running in second place behind more Labour MPs than Tories) and the increasing clamour of the Europhobic right, supported by sections of the Yellow Press, there is growing momentum behind the campaign for a vote to withdraw from Europe in the referendum expected in 2017 (or possibly 2016). However, various figures in big business are already making noises and sounding the alarm for those considerable and still powerful forces within the UK economy and the global capitalist elite who see their opportunities to maximise profits (through standardisation and the removal of tariff barriers and national variations in regulation and through the free movement of goods and capital across borders) threatened by the possibility of a UK withdrawal.

As the referendum draws closer it is likely that there will be a mobilisation of ‘business’ interests behind a ‘Yes’ vote to stay in Europe and this will be reflected in splits between Tory supporting elements of the press. Some businesses and lobby groups (Murdoch’s News Corp and Sky for example) may see their own commercial interests as best served by having the UK outside the EU, thus weakening the EU’s ability to regulate global corporations like themselves, but manufacturing industry (what little we have left in the UK) could take a different view.

Then there is the ‘Left’ - and the Green Left - who, like the Tories, also find it hard to agree a united position on the issue of EU withdrawal. There have been few declarations for either a ‘Yes’ or a “No” vote. The Alliance for Workers’ Liberty will be in the ‘Yes’ camp arguing for a Europe of working class solidarity and a Federal future. Other groups such as the Communist Party of Britain and the Socialist Party will campaign for withdrawal (and it will be interesting to see if they will share joint platforms). Meanwhile, the TUC (arguably the core of the Labour Movement if not part of the Socialist Left) is hedging its bets but is expected by many to eventually come down on the side of a ‘Yes’ vote.

So what is the **AGS** position? Well, that’s the purpose of this special Newsletter: to kick off a debate within the Alliance before our conference on 10 October 2015 where a decision may be made.

Have your say in Green Socialist

Articles and letters on the topic of the referendum from members and others are invited by the editor of Green Socialist. The next edition will now be largely devoted to this issue and is coming out before the **AGS** conference to facilitate this debate. Get contributions in by **8 August 2015** to: editor@greensocialist.org.uk or GS Editor, freepost AGS.

The case for getting out

An AGS member puts the case for socialists and progressives to work for withdrawal from a European Union which has become an unaccountable bureaucracy dedicated to serving the interests of the capitalist class by imposing neoliberal economics and austerity on the entire continent.

First of all, let's forget what nasty groups already advocate withdrawal:- the largely racist and foolishly nostalgic UKIP; much of the right-wing of the Tories; and the openly racist far-right groups. They are not the point. The point is whether British membership of the European Union is a good idea from the point of view of environmental socialists.

Are we internationalist? Sure! Do we think of Britain as part of Europe? Sure! But the current European Union is a quite different question.

Firstly, its constitution is entirely anti-democratic. Of the four "legs" of the EU, only one, the European Parliament, is elected. (Of course, realistically, even that is elected by a small minority because most people recognise its irrelevance). The European Parliament has virtually no power.

It is the appointed European Commission that proposes legislation. It is the appointed European Commission that controls all the business of the EU. It is the appointed Commission that negotiates appalling treaties like TTIP.

Even worse is the European Central Bank. Not only is the ECB appointed rather than elected, it is actually constitutionally forbidden to take account of the views of elected politicians.

The fourth leg is the Council of Ministers. These are heads of member states. It is rather like the USA being controlled, not by the elected federal government, but by meetings of the leaders of each of its fifty constituent states. It simply wouldn't work - and it simply does not work in the EU. To take one example; Cameron quite evidently does not go to the Council as part of a European government. He quite clearly goes to it with domestic considerations foremost on his mind, not European ones.

We have just been treated to a demonstration of just how right-wing and neoliberal the EU is in practice. The institutions that control the EU have just carried out a coup d'etat against Greece. Henceforth Greece - nominally a member state of the EU - will be just a protectorate of the EU, run by Germany and its allies. Greece has been driven into the ground in the name of neoliberal austerity and will be hammered further into the ground by the latest "rescue" deal. The rescue, of course, is for its EU creditor banks, not for Greece. It will not save the Greeks.

Do not think that Greece is some kind of aberration. The gutting of Greece by the EU is entirely in line with the policies pursued by the EU and, indeed, the pro-capitalist constitution of the EU. This is not some unfortunate accident, but the logical playing out of the basic neo-liberal nature of this European Union, both in its structure and in its practice.

The EU was founded partly as a bulwark against further war in Europe. In that respect it succeeded for a while. But now this actual European Union is driving the people of Europe further and further into a position of nationalism and opposition to Europeanism. The current EU is so bad for the people of Europe, and so dedicated to the interests of transnationals and neo-liberalism, that it is clearly against the interests of Europeans.

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The date of the next AGS National Committee (open to members of the AGS) has been changed to **5th September**, 1.15pm, Lucas Arms, Grays Inn Road (5 mins from Kings Cross Station)

The case for staying in

The case for the UK remaining within the European Union is one of principle and pragmatic necessity. Green Socialists should recognise that our goals are more likely to be achieved as part of a continent-wide mass movement rather than as an isolated faction within an economically and politically marginalised UK.

Forty years ago the British Left was relatively united against continued membership of the European Economic Community (as it was then), largely on the basis that the EEC would inhibit attempts to socialise our economy through Nationalisation, Planning Agreements (remember those?) and greater Industrial Democracy.

In 1975 the Labour Movement (which included the Labour Party in those days) was still strong and feeling confident. We had seen off Ted Heath's assault on the trade unions, forced the release from gaol of the Pentonville Five, shown the power of workers from different industries uniting against the common foe at Saltley Gates and brought the Tories down in a wave of industrial action and protests in the 'Who governs Britain?' election of 1974.

The EEC membership referendum in June 1975 was seen as a setback to hopes for political and economic progress in the UK. Even then some of us had our doubts about the language and arguments being deployed against tying our economic future to that of Continental Europe but despite these doubts most of us followed the line of the Broad Left and the Party and campaigned for a 'No' vote.

The situation four decades on is unrecognisably different. It is quite true that predictions about the EEC (now absorbed into the EU) being an obstacle to attempts in any member state to regulate or socialise their economy in the interests of the working class have been borne out (the fact that Greece is now effectively ruled by EU/ECB/IMF appointed Commissioners underlines this). It is also true that the unaccountable bureaucrats in Brussels and the European economic elite have conspired with each other (in collusion with pro-capitalist political forces, including the Labour Party and the Tories) to produce a regulatory regime designed to consolidate the power, influence and profitability of corporations and to privatise and de-regulate as many public services as possible. However, despite all this, there is still a strong, in fact overwhelming, argument for fighting to keep the UK within the EU.

For most of the last forty years (and continually since 1979) the UK has been on the right of the European political spectrum and has been holding back progress in the rest of Europe. It would be understandable if some of our continental comrades decided that they would be far better off without the UK and campaigned to facilitate our exit, yet this has not happened. Instead we have seen solidarity and understanding from the European Left and repeated calls for united political action across the EU. The fact is that Europe, despite all the awful things that do emerge from Brussels, has been generally beneficial for the UK's Working Class. It may be true that free movement of (cheap) labour has helped depress wages in some sectors (though not as much as the collapse of trade union organisation and the abandonment of serious attempts to organise difficult industries) but this has been offset by the many benefits that EU law has brought to workers (the right to paid holidays for example),

Those who understand the way modern economies work (which many Tories seem not to) can see that the UK would be enormously handicapped outside the EU. The notion that our ability to trade across Europe would be unaffected by EU withdrawal is just ludicrous. However, the economic argument is less significant than the fact that a UK exit from the EU would be disastrous for attempts to limit and reverse Climate Change and environmental degradation. It is already crystal clear that the steps necessary to tackle Climate Change and to ameliorate its effects require transnational and global action, especially in Europe. This means that we have to co-ordinate and co-operate with our European partners and detaching the UK from the EU would set this task back by decades – time we simply don't have.

SOME EUROPEAN UNION QUESTIONS

Mike Davies, raises some questions members might want to consider in the debate before, during and after the 2015 Annual Conference on 10 October in Leeds.

Greece & the European Union

It is quite obvious that what has been happening the last five months over Greece is an attempted coup d'état by the EU against a member country. The capitalists who run the EU see Syriza as a big threat, simply not compatible with a neo-liberal EU. The Greeks were to be forced to change their government to a more acceptable one.

However, for what reason have the EU taken such a hard line with Greece over the last five years, especially since those actions resulted in the Syriza victory at the polls? For most of that period Greece was not run by nasty lefties but by either the right-wing New Democracy or the right-leaning social democrats of PASOK. Was it just stupidity (or lack of attention) whereby they failed to realise what effect EU policies would have on Greece? Was it just technocratic rigidity, an inability to modify their "rules" to fit the real world? Could it have been a deliberate policy to ruin Greece, as an example to any other member state who did not meet the supposed EU norm defined by Germany?

Greece and & the euro

Objectively, joining the Eurozone was a big mistake for Greece. The euro itself is a fatally flawed project. Fiscal union, and the political union that underpins it, are necessary pre-conditions for a successful currency union. Without that, the weaker countries go to the wall, unable to devalue because they don't control the currency and similarly unable to use quantitative easing.

The EU tried to do it backwards, apparently as a way of forcing through political union to solve the predictable problems of the euro. That has proved a very high risk game.

Why did Greece join the euro? Maybe for access to credit, enabling the rich to get richer. Another possible motive was that joining first the EU and then the euro reflected a desire, stretching over two-hundred years since its independence struggle, for Greece to be seen as part of (modern) Europe rather than a (backward) former province of the Ottoman Empire.

Germany & the euro

Germany's economic strength relies heavily on the single currency. It exploits its own efficiency to turn the weaker members of the EU into consumers of German produce, trapped in deficit. Greek economic weakness is the direct concomitant of German economic strength.

However, Germany achieved, and continues to achieve, that strength not only by playing beggar-my-neighbour but by begging its own working class. German workers have seen stagnant or falling wages and welfare cuts.

So who benefits from the single currency? Certainly not German workers, which may be why there is such domestic political resistance in Germany to "bailing out" Greek workers.

Have your say online

A dedicated discussion site has been established for Green Socialists to put their point of view on the EU referendum (and what the AGS policy should be). The decision will be taken by AGS conference but any **AGS** member (and like-minded friends from outside the alliance) can express their view at:

<https://europeandtheleft.wordpress.com/>

Versions of the articles on these pages will appear on this website. All **AGS** members and like minded green-leftists are invited to comment and put their point of view, on this website or by sending comments to Green Socialist.